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AUTHOR Bland, Carole J.; Bergquist, William H.
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ABSTRACT

This digest of a larger report with the same title uses a question-and-answer format to examine the productivity of senior faculty members at institutions of higher education. It reviews issues related to the aging of full-time faculty at a time when many institutions are undergoing major changes and restructuring. It reports data suggesting that productivity of senior faculty does not decline but instead changes focus. Distinctive assets and needs of senior faculty are identified, including their confidence in their teaching and research skills, commitment to their institutions, and knowledge of the academic enterprise. Factors that can ensure a vital senior faculty are discussed, both in terms of intrinsic factors (such as socialization, subject knowledge, and a vital network of colleagues) and extrinsic factors (such as institutional goals, participative governance, and a supportive academic culture). The digest urges the maintenance of productivity of older faculty members through a systems approach that addresses individual vitality features, institutional vitality features, and the essential link between them. (DB)

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By 2000, 50 percent of full-time faculty will be over 55, and 68 percent will be over 50. Just when many universities and colleges in America are making major shifts in their missions and their organizational structures, faculty members who are expected to implement these bold new visions will be out signing up for their senior citizen discount cards. Is it any cause for alarm?

Who Are Senior Faculty and What Role Will They Play in Meeting This Challenge?

Institutional vitality in the next century is in the hands of senior faculty members in their 50s and beyond, in the "late-middle" stage of their careers. As young and idealistic faculty in the late 1960s and early 1970s, they overwhelmed the established professoriat in both numbers and enthusiasm at a time when there never before had been such an abundance of financial resources, student enrollments, and public support.

Today, they once again have the opportunity to provide leadership in transforming American higher education. But now they and the existing conditions are vastly different.

Are Senior Faculty Vital and Productive?

On average, research productivity drops off with age, although many senior faculty remain highly productive. Further, what they produce is at least comparable in quality to that produced by younger faculty. The conclusion that age causes a decline in quantity is not supported. Rather, increased responsibilities and a shift in focus on high quality rather than quantity are likely causes.

Senior faculty commit about the same amount of time to teaching as younger faculty and have similar responsibilities for advising students. Studies on the association of age and teaching effectiveness are mixed, but no studies have found a large negative relationship.

What Are the Distinctive Assets and Needs of Senior Faculty?

Most senior faculty are confident in their teaching and research skills, and they possess a deep sense of commitment to their institutions, highly inculcated values, a vital network of professional colleagues, knowledge of the academic enterprise, and an ability to manage multiple, simultaneous projects. They value alternative viewpoints and collaboration and feel quite "generative," wishing to teach and support the next generation of faculty and their institutions. They can now perceive their careers in new ways, and they often desire expanded and diversified roles in their institutions.

In contrast, a small minority of senior faculty feel "stuck." Their career plans or personal goals have not been fulfilled, and as a result they are inclined to be unsupportive of the institution and to view younger colleagues as rivals or painful reminders of their own unfulfilled dreams.

What Factors Ensure Vital Senior Faculty?

Intrinsic factors that influence a faculty member's vitality and productivity include socialization, subject knowledge and skills, past mentors, work habits, adult career development, a vital network of colleagues, simultaneous projects under way at the same time, sufficient work time, orientation, autonomy, commitment, and morale. Studies find that extrinsic factors also influence senior faculty members' productivity and vitality. Institutions can enhance faculty members' productivity by establishing clear, coordinated goals and emphasizing core faculty functions (research and teaching), a supportive academic culture, a positive group climate, participative governance, decentralized organization, frequent communication, sufficient and accessible resources, a critical mass of faculty who have been together for a while and bring different perspectives, adequate

and fair salaries and other rewards, targeted recruitment and selection, actively providing opportunities for growth, and seasoned, participative academic leadership.

How Can the Vitality of Senior Faculty Be Maintained?

In many institutions, it appears that these essential features of vitality for senior faculty (in fact for all faculty) are weakened. How do we counter this trend? To maintain the productivity of older faculty members (in fact of all faculty), a systems approach is required that addresses individual vitality features, institutional vitality features, and the essential link between them.

Institutions frequently offer a hodgepodge of faculty and organizational development strategies that are not clearly aimed at particular vitality features. Such efforts have a much smaller impact than would a similar number of efforts guided by an overall plan. An alternative to this hodgepodge is a *comprehensive* approach to individual and organizational productivity that provides a rational foundation for selecting a combination of development activities that together will have a larger impact.

This comprehensive approach begins with the understanding that the purpose of a faculty and organizational development program is quite simple: to facilitate faculty members' commitment to and ability to achieve their own career goals and their institution's goals by continually assisting and developing faculty members in areas related to their and the institution's goals, and by continually improving the organizational features that facilitate quality work. These features include, for example, mechanisms that coordinate individual goals and organizational goals, equitable personnel policies, opportunities for development, and a supportive climate. Institutional features that are especially critical for senior faculty appear to be opportunities to grow, being appreciated by the leaders of the institution, collegiality, and a commitment on the part of the leaders of the institution to academic values and the founding mission of the college or university.

Ultimately to facilitate continuous individual and collective productivity, a university or college should aim for a comprehensive development program that addresses all faculty at all ages and career stages and that continually assesses and modifies its organizational structure and processes. Realistically, most organizations must choose a few strategies from a comprehensive approach on which to focus the majority of their development strategies at any given time. Having a comprehensive approach in mind, however, allows one to best select where to focus attention.

It is puzzling why so few institutions invest significantly, either intellectually or financially, to ensure senior faculty members' competence and to make the setting more conducive for their productivity. One reason for this inaction may be the previous lack of a clear profile of the features that affect senior faculty members' productivity. Without this information, leaders are unclear about where to invest resources and thus are reticent to do so.

Senior faculty are perhaps most interesting and capable at this point in their lives. Their fires still burn! Whether they are still vital--or can once again be vital--largely depends on the organization. The "graying" faculty who have effectively served our collegiate institutions for many years certainly deserve this attention. More pragmatically, they require this attention if colleges and universities are to be successfully redesigned to meet the challenges and needs of the 21st century.

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